

**Column for Manila Bulletin**  
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## **Of Trees and Forest**

### **O.F.W. Summit: Changing Mindsets**

MANILA, Philippines — I've been writing about overseas Filipino workers (OFW) with a common message: the government should do more to help them and protect their interests.

In my view, however, promoting the interests of OFWs cannot be the sole responsibility and function of the government. So this time I want to focus on what the private sector can do for the benefit of our modern heroes.

On November 24, Villar Foundation and GoNegosyo launched the 1st OFW & Family Summit with the theme "Kabuhayan Para sa Kinabukasan."

The summit, which will be a yearly event, is essentially a partnership between Villar Foundation and GoNegosyo, both advocates of entrepreneurship, and the OFWs and their families.

The summit was conceptualized for OFWs and their families. So we made sure that every aspect of the event — from the program to the exhibitors — was focused on them. We wanted the summit to be really worthwhile, educational, and inspirational for all of them.

I'm glad that the first summit was well attended, and I hope that it will be the start of a movement to change the lives of OFWs and their families for the better and secure for them a stable and prosperous future.

Everybody recognizes the huge contribution of overseas Filipino workers to our economy. Their remittances, which exceeded \$18 billion last year, fuel consumption and drive economic growth amid the slowdown in exports and the decline in other sectors like agriculture.

This year, the economy will still post positive growth, despite the financial crisis in Europe and the continuing weakness of the United States economy, because remittances are still expected to grow at least to an estimated \$20 billion.

So the prospects remain bright for our country, but, alas, not so bright for many of our OFWs. Despite their huge role in driving economic growth, the individual OFWs and their families still face an uncertain future.

How many times have we heard of OFWs who, after working for so many years abroad, came back to face the same impoverished conditions that they left because their savings were lost either to unscrupulous persons or because of lack of knowledge and skills to use their hard-earned money for income-generating activities?

Several studies have found out that the money sent home by OFWs is usually spent on consumer products like appliances, electronic gadgets, and the like. The mentality is really to spend the money instead of making it "grow."

Changing this mentality is something that I have been pushing for so long. So, I am glad that we now have a partnership with other advocates and with the OFW community that will work for one common goal: teach OFWs and their families ways to use their money wisely, that is, to generate a constant stream of income.

I would like to acknowledge the experts who participated in the summit, namely, Toots Ople of the Blas F. Ople Policy Center, Leonardo Dayao Sr. of Puregold, Dean Pax Lapid of Entrepreneur School of Asia, Victoria Villa of Natasha, Dr. Rosalinda Hortaleza of Hortaleza, and Armanda Bartolome of GMB Franchise Developers.

We also heard success stories from OFWs-turned-entrepreneurs. Prudencio Garcia, who used to work in Saudi Arabia, returned home to help in the family business, Meken, which is now one of the leading meat companies. Myrna Padilla, a former domestic helper, is now the owner of a BPO company.

Although the summit is a private initiative, the government also has a stake in ensuring its success. For instance, remittances will contribute more to economic growth if these are channeled to entrepreneurial activities, which generate employment and stimulate other business activities.

This, in turn, will encourage more people to go into business here rather than seek employment abroad, where they risk even their lives.

Developing a nation of entrepreneurs will also take us to our ultimate and elusive goal: end poverty.

How can the government help in our effort? By implementing reforms that will improve the investment climate, promoting good governance, improving infrastructure, and establishing peace and order.

In the end, changing the OFWs' mindset is a self-help effort. Peter Drucker, father of modern management, said: "The best way to predict the future is to create it."

The Villar Foundation and GoNegosyo are committed to helping OFWs establish and run their own businesses, and the government may also provide some help. Still, it is the OFWs' own determination that will secure for them and their families a bright future.

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